



photo by Cecelia Green

What is an Observer?

Fisheries observers are biologists who work independently to collect biological information aboard commercial fishing vessels and at shoreside processing plants in Alaskan waters. This information is used by federal and state agencies in the management of commercial fisheries in the North Pacific. Observers are deployed by private observer providers for up to three months. Prior to each deployment, observers sign a written contract outlining the terms of each employment period. Contracts may vary between observer providers. The job is hazardous and the conditions at sea can be harsh. However, the work is adventurous and observers travel to some of Alaska's most remote areas.



photo by Jason Phillips

Job Training

Initial preparation consists of a comprehensive three week training program either in Seattle or Anchorage. Curriculum includes safety while at sea, sampling methods, species identification, requirements for data recording and reporting, the basics of fisheries management, pertinent fishing regulations, and life as an observer. Attendance, full participation in exercises, the ability to don a survival suit in under one minute and climb in a life raft, and a passing grade of 75% on exams is required.



photo by Conor Nolan

Things to Consider

Working as an observer in Alaskan waters can be physically and mentally demanding. Conditions are often cold, damp, and

unpleasant. Rough seas are common in the North Pacific and seasickness is very uncomfortable for many people. Vessel lengths range from 60 feet to over 300 feet. The limited space aboard vessels results in living and working conditions that are usually tight and cramped. Some fishing vessels are equipped to go out to sea longer than a month at a time. Feelings of loneliness from the isolated conditions are common. Observers are typically isolated from contact with family members and friends. Advanced medical assistance will not be readily available. A typical day's activities include heavy lifting (up to 80 pounds), climbing ladders, and working on rolling, slippery decks. The work schedule of an observer is often erratic and unpredictable. Fishing takes place seven days a week, 24 hours a day and the work schedule for an observer follows the vessel's fishing practices. The unpredictable and broken work schedule often make it impossible to adhere to regular sleeping patterns.

Observer Duties

- Record information on fishing effort, location, and estimate total catch
- Sample to determine the species composition of catches
- Collect critical biological information such as size frequencies and sex ratios
- Collect biological samples
- Monitor crew activities to determine level of compliance with fishing regulations
- Record incidental takes and interactions of marine mammals and seabirds with fishing gear and vessels
- Keep a detailed logbook of sampling activities
- Complete a post-cruise debriefing



photo by Eli Copen



photo by David G. Sears

Standard Requirements

- *Employment by a permitted observer provider*
- *Bachelor's degree in natural sciences*
- *Thirty semester hours or equivalent in applicable biological sciences with extensive use of dichotomous keys in at least on course*
- *One college level course each in math and statistics*
- *No limitations that will interfere with performance of duties*
- *Competent computer skills*



Permitted Observer Providers

- *Alaskan Observers, Inc.*
(206) 283-7310
www.alaskanobservers.com
- *Data Contractors, Inc.*
(907) 561-2210
www.datacontractors.com
- *NWO, Inc.*
(425) 673-6445
ngrdfobs@aol.com
- *Saltwater Inc.*
(907) 276-3241
www.saltwaterinc.com
- *TechSea International*
(206) 285-1408
www.TechSea.com

For Further Information

*National Marine Fisheries Service
North Pacific Observer Program, Bldg. 4
7600 Sand Point Way N.E.
Seattle, WA 98115
(206) 526-4078*

www.afsc.noaa.gov/refm/observers/default.htm



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